Culture
News



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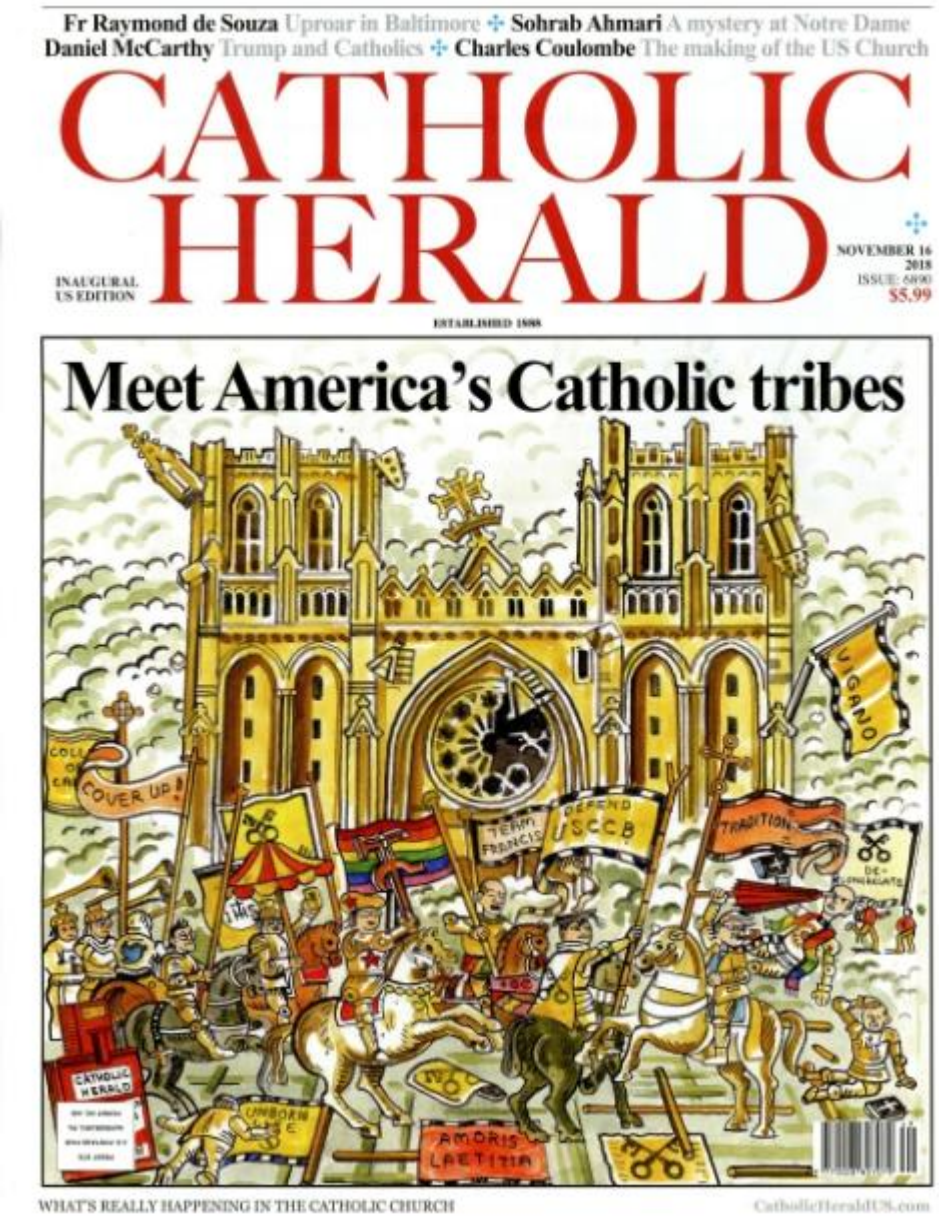
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When the London-based newsweekly the Catholic Herald launched its new U.S. edition in mid-November, it did so with a humorous explainer on "America's Catholic Tribes," complete with colorful caricatures and funny names like "Rad Trads" and "Team Francis."

The six "tribes" (plus a catchall category for "conspiracy theorists" on both the left and the right) sought to expand the oversimplistic, dualistic descriptors of U.S. Catholics as either "liberals" or "conservatives."

But what the authors, Herald editor-in-chief Damian Thompson and U.S. editor Michael Warren Davis, missed was a group to which their own publication belongs: well-funded and interconnected conservative Catholic media, with financial and other ties to influential right-wing money and people.

In the Herald's "tribes" article, the "Militants" category did mention the infamous websites Church Militant and LifeSiteNews, which were instrumental in spreading the mostly discredited allegations of papal cover-up of sexual abuse made by disgruntled Vatican official Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò.



The cover of the inaugural U.S. edition of the Catholic Herald magazine, launched in November 2018 by the 130-year-old British publication (CNS/Courtesy of Catholic Herald)

But the web of connections between conservative Catholic media and wealthy donors, right-wing activists, high-ranking clergy and libertarian political players go beyond these two outliers to include the seemingly innocuous TV, radio, print and online sources where many people in the pews get their Catholic news and information.

The Herald is only the newest player on this team, although its history across the Atlantic stretches back 130 years and has included contributions by Catholic literary luminaries such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and G.K. Chesterton.

Today's U.K. Herald, however, seems more focused on Brexit than Father Brown. Its current owners, British hotelier Sir Rocco Forte and the once-jailed newspaper magnate Lord Conrad Black, are political conservatives who have publicly supported the campaign to leave the European Union. According to a 2015 publication on "Britain's Global Leadership," Forte is a "sponsor and patron" of the Bruges Group, a euroskeptic organization that was instrumental to the Brexit vote's success in 2016.

Herald leaders on this side of the pond appear to be following in its parent publication's footsteps, aligning themselves with both conservative political allies and anti-Francis forces in the church — such as the Ethics and Public Policy Center and First Things magazine, among others — to deliver "what's really happening in the Catholic Church," as the Herald's tagline promises.

They also have consulted with none other than Breitbart News founder Stephen Bannon for editorial guidance. Since leaving the Trump administration, Bannon has been busy in Europe, founding a nationalist nonprofit (the organizers of which have met at one of Forte's hotels) and working with Cardinal Raymond Burke — a leading Pope Francis critic — on a Rome-based right-wing Catholic institute committed to the "defense of what used to be called Christendom."

In his meeting with Herald leaders last fall at the "Breitbart Embassy" (the name given to the website's headquarters in Washington, D.C.), Bannon allegedly encouraged the editors to connect with "Catholic influencers and millionaires" as part of a "defense of the Judeo-Christian West," according to a Buzzfeed article.

"The U.S. version of the Catholic Herald can have a massive impact, especially with the demise of the Weekly Standard and other conservative periodicals," Bannon told Buzzfeed. "These are sophisticated people with a sophisticated publication if they follow the lead of the Spectator [a conservative British publication] with their American edition."

The U.S. editor did not respond to NCR's request for an interview. The U.K. editor-in-chief declined to be interviewed or to answer specific emailed questions from NCR

about the publication’s funding or any formal or informal relationships with other organizations or people, as well as inquiries about the success of the U.S. edition so far.

In an email, Thompson expressed concern about the NCR article being a "hit job" and insisted that the Herald is independent of outside interests. In an email, he agreed that some Catholic publications "on the left as well as the right" have "mysterious" sources of funding that result in their strings being pulled by "vested interests."

But, he added, "the Herald isn't one of them."

Editorial slant

Anthony Hopkins, in his role as a priest-exorcist in the horror film "The Rite," stares hauntingly from the cover of the Jan. 11 edition of the Herald, illustrating a story on "Why exorcism is back with a vengeance." The Welsh-born actor, who now lives in California, could also serve as model for the publication's new bicultural focus. The exorcism story mentions the "mushrooming demand for exorcisms" in both Britain and the United States.

In fact, the Herald — which shifted from a newspaper to magazine format in 2014 — has long included news from the former colonies. Even before the U.S. launch, nearly half of the website's traffic already came from the United States, according to the Herald's own data.

That was part of the reason for the Herald's expansion into the already crowded — and contentious — U.S. Catholic news market. It was a matter of simple numbers: The U.S. has more Catholics (an estimated 70 million or more) than the entire population of Britain.

And since not many Catholics in Britain are conservative, the Herald was "fishing in a very small pond in the U.K.," said Catherine Pepinster, former editor of The Tablet of London and a commentator on religious affairs, who believes the publication hopes to gain more subscribers, and thus ad revenue, in the U.S.

The Herald's U.K. publisher and board chair admitted as much in a column about the U.S. launch: "Unlike in Britain, where orthodox-leaning, educated Catholics are a tiny minority, America boasts a huge community of intelligent Catholics who wish to be

informed and enlightened," wrote William Cash.

With the U.S. church "in a state of crisis," the U.S. Herald purports to bring a "fresh voice" and a "positive attitude" to "a seeming state of civil war," wrote Cash, whose father is Sir William Nigel Paul Cash, a prominent euroskeptic in Britain's House of Commons.

Cash Jr. said the U.S. Herald will remain "boldly independent" and "refuse to be dragged into the politicisation that has so divided the US Church."

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But it didn't take long for the U.S. Herald to jump right into the fray, by publishing an opinion column some saw as anti-Semitic. In its Christmas issue, controversial Greek journalist Panagiotis "Taki" Theodoracopulos opined that The New York Times has underreported sex abuse cases in the Hasidic community because of the influence of its Jewish readers. (The article has since been removed from the website).

The Herald quickly published a retort from its own contributing editor Sohrab Ahmari (who is also op-ed editor of the New York Post), correcting the inaccuracy about Times coverage of abuse among ultra-Orthodox Jews and calling out Taki for his anti-Semitism and racism.

In his column titled "Why Taki's views disgust me," Ahmari noted that Theodoracopulos routinely refers to New York as the "Big Bagel." He also said that the piece was published "to the chagrin of many of the magazine's friends."

That editorial decision was likely made by Davis, a 24-year-old Catholic convert who had little background in Catholic journalism before coming to the Herald less than two years ago.

Born in the U.S., Davis studied in Australia and previously edited Quadrant, an Australian magazine known for its right-wing bias. (Other Quadrant connections include U.S. Herald CEO Robert Wargas, who has written for the Aussie publication,

and Quadrant international editor John O'Sullivan, who will be a contributing editor to the U.S. Herald.) Davis also covered the 2016 presidential election for the conservative Spectator Australia.

The U.S. editor claims the Herald's only bias is to be "faithful to the magisterium," without reflexively defending the pope, which he believes is "not the job of the Catholic journalist" — as Davis told Catholic News Service in an interview after the launch of the U.S. edition.

"We want to be hard on the bad guys, the abusers, anyone trying to compromise the faith. [We're] hard on them, but we don't want to bum people out. That's not our job. We give people the facts," he said.

Davis said the Herald is "not afraid to say things that might embarrass the pope," but that the magazine is "not out to get him or attack Francis for his own sake."

"I love the Holy Father. I don't believe he is evil or subversive by any means, [but] I am not a volunteer PR guy for the Holy See," he said.

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> Tweet this

It's doubtful anyone is mistaking the Herald as pro-Francis. In fact, the publication is connected to a number of those who are leading the anti-Francis fight, including fellow journalists at the ultra-conservative Catholic magazine First Things.

First Things' not-so-hidden agenda was made even more blatant in a recent column by editor R.R. Reno titled "A failing papacy," which describes Francis' politics as "cold and cunning," and his pontificate as a "raw exercise of ecclesiastical power" that "creates a dictatorial atmosphere."

The Herald's Davis recently contributed a piece to First Things in which he admitted to his dislike of Francis and even says the pontiff can be "devilish," though he ultimately encourages conservative Catholics to "pray for the pope."

In turn, the Herald regularly publishes First Things senior editor Matthew Schmitz, who now raises his concerns about the current papacy in both publications — as well as in a guest New York Times opinion piece, which began, "Pope Francis must resign ."

In his email correspondence with NCR, Herald editor-in-chief Thompson suggested talking to Ed Condon, who was listed as a Herald contributing editor in 2018 and is also the Washington bureau chief for Catholic News Agency (CNA). The Herald also runs articles from CNA, which is owned by the Eternal Word Television Network. Condon did not reply to a request for an interview.

One thing these editors and contributors have in common is their gender, prompting at least one reader to wonder "if the voices of American women are being included in their reporting," as Catholic author and speaker Katie Prejean McGrady tweeted on Jan. 16.

So far, at least, the Herald masthead lists no female editors.

George Weigel is another author shared by both the U.S. Herald and First Things, but Weigel's connection to the Herald is even more concrete than shared newsprint.

Close quarters

Just steps from Washington's Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in the Dupont Circle Historic District sits an 11-story office building on M Street Northwest. The ground floor boasts a hip bar and dance club, but the upper floors contain offices for all kinds of organizations, including the U.S. Office of Special Counsel.

It is in Suite 910 that the U.S. Herald shares office space with two other organizations: the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the Faith and Reason Institute, both conservative think tanks with prominent Catholic leaders.

The hawkish, neocon Ethics and Public Policy Center was founded in 1976 and is "dedicated to applying the Judeo-Christian moral tradition to critical issues of public policy," according to its website. It has been pretty successful in linking neoconservatives and conservative Christians over its four-decade history.

The center's board includes several prominent conservative Catholics, including vice chairman Robert George, a Princeton professor who formerly served on First Things' advisory board; Mary Ellen Bork, wife of the late Judge Robert Bork who also serves on Christendom College's advisory board and the editorial board of the magazine of the conservative Women for Faith and Family; and Leonard Leo, executive vice president of the Federalist Society, which has been influential in having conservative justices placed on the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 2014, the center launched a new project called the Catholic Women's Forum, which focuses on countering so-called "gender ideology." Headed by Mary Rice Hasson (a frequent commenter on EWTN), the forum made headlines this summer with its "Letter to Pope Francis from Catholic Women," demanding answers to questions raised by Viganò's allegations of papal cover-up.

But Weigel, the center's distinguished senior fellow, is likely its most prominent employee. The author of a best-selling biography of Pope John Paul II, Weigel also writes a weekly column, "The Catholic Difference," which is carried by a number of diocesan newspapers (two of which — in Arlington, Virginia, and Madison, Wisconsin — share the Catholic Herald name, though are not related to the U.K. Catholic Herald).

Advertisement

NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters has said about Weigel, "No one in the English-speaking world has been more responsible for producing the early hagiography surrounding St. Pope John Paul 'the Great.' "

Weigel also has served on the board of the New York-based Institute on Religion and Public Life, which publishes First Things. Founded in 1990 by the late Fr. Richard Neuhaus, First Things has been supported through the years by the conservative, Milwaukee-based Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which also has funded the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Other shared funders of First Things and the Ethics and Public Policy Center — according to First Things' 2017 annual report and foundation tax documents — include the Casillas Foundation, the Sarah Scaife Foundation and the Adolph Coors Foundation. The Coors Foundation is also a major contributor to the American

Enterprise Institute, another conservative think tank, and the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which fought the contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act.

With a more than $3 million annual budget, the Ethics and Public Policy Center also receives financial support from conservative Catholic donors, including hedge funder Sean Fieler, who donated $100,000 through his Chiaroscuro Foundation in 2015.

Another likely donor is banker and philanthropist Frank Hanna III, for whom donation data is unavailable but who lists the center as among his "affiliations" on his company's website. The Knights of Columbus also give money to the center.

Funding information for the Herald was not available through U.S. tax documents, but its U.K. editor-in-chief said in an email to NCR, "No one outside the organisation has given us a cent. Nothing! All these rich right-wing Catholics are depositing their money elsewhere."

He added: "But that's OK, because it means we can do our own thinking."

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Also sharing space in the Herald's D.C. office is the Faith and Reason Institute, headed by Robert Royal, a former vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center who founded the smaller think tank in 1999 to promote the ideas of John Paul II, whose 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* gave the organization its name.

In 2008, in the middle of the Obama-McCain presidential campaign, Royal created the online journal The Catholic Thing, which offers a daily column by a variety of authors. Its first columnist was the late Michael Novak of the American Enterprise Institute.

Royal also has written for other conservative publications, including First Things and National Review, and is a regular on EWTN, where he is part of the so-called "papal

posse" group of commentators on "The World Over," many of whom are frequently critical of Pope Francis and Vatican officials.

An influence revolution

Since the Herald is a privately held and for-profit company, it is difficult to confirm its editor-in-chief's assertion that it has no connections to "rich right-wing Catholics," beyond sharing office space and authors with other publications and organizations that do.

But it clearly is attempting to garner the right-leaning Catholic audience, which at least one political theorist sees as part of a coordinated, 40-year effort on the part of an overlapping and connected web of scholars, nonprofit organizations and media outlets on the right to shape public opinion in the U.S.

Since Catholics are still the largest single religiously affiliated group in the country, "there is an outsized influence that Catholics have on American public opinion," said Steven Millies, author of *Good Intentions: A History of Catholic Voters' Road from Roe to Trump*.

"If you can shape American Catholic public opinion, then you have an effect on the social and political opinion in the country more broadly," said Millies, an associate professor of public theology at Catholic Theological Union and director of its Bernardin Center.

Of course, shaping public opinion is nothing new, he added, though tactics may change.

The role of think tanks in shaping public opinion through policy research, analysis and advocacy exploded in the second half of the 20th century. Changes in campaign finance laws in the 1970s resulted in what Millies calls "a revolution in lobbying" that included political action committees and a more than doubling of the number of think tanks, according to an annual scholarly report about think tanks.

The reflection of the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle is seen on the building that houses the U.S. Catholic Herald, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and the Faith and Reason Institute. (Google Maps)

The nearly 2,000 think tanks in the U.S. — more than any other country in the world — may be affiliated with a university, a political party or even operate as a for-profit entity. But many are operated as tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, with funding coming from special interest groups and individual donors. The Ethics and Public Policy Center, founded in 1976, is an example of the latter.

Today, the influence revolution is in media, Millies said. "Because of the way we live and consume information, it's not even necessary to have a think tank with scholars and books anymore," he said. "It's enough to have a media organization that produces content and pushes out social media messaging."

While those from both sides of the political spectrum use think tanks and media to influence opinion, those of the right have had more practice and have been more sophisticated and effective, Millies said.

What concerns Millies is that some conservatives — including some Catholic ones — increasingly argue not just about policy differences, but whether there should even be political conversation and dialogue at all.

The difference is no longer between "liberal" and "conservative," he said, but between those with "an intransigent viewpoint that we know the truth and need to enact it" and those who have "a dialogical understanding in which truth is something we find together."

Pepinster expects to see a related "anger and despair about modernity" as part of the Herald's identifiable character in the U.S., as it has been in the U.K., where it carved out a niche as the journal for conservative Catholics.

"This is the publication for you if you prefer Benedict XVI to Francis, you loathe guitars, prefer communion given to you in the mouth by your priest, sing the Credo with gusto in Latin and believe *Humanae Vitae* was church teaching at its very best," she told NCR in an email interview.

One theologian calls it "vigilant Catholicism," as evidenced by the strident commentary on social media, especially Twitter. Herald writers and other conservative Catholics often have a passionate, even angry, defense of their view of orthodoxy, said Kevin Ahern, assistant professor of religious studies at Manhattan College in New York.

Populated with a high percentage of converts, this segment of Catholicism "is characterized by a romantic nostalgia for a chivalrous past and a deep passion for what one believes, but also a strong sense that there's a siege and we're constantly under attack," he said.

Still, Ahern is hopeful that, given a platform with more than 140 characters, some of the U.S. Herald contributors will write deeper, more nuanced reflections. And he has to admit that launching a new Catholic print publication today can be seen as good news.

"It's interesting," he said. "And in some ways it's hopeful that there's a market, given the state of Catholic publishing and other media today."

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